



TO: The Honorable Members of the Assembly Committee on Colleges & Universities

FROM: Kathy Markeland, Associate Director

DATE: January 18, 2018

RE: **Support for Assembly Bill 777 – Tuition Remission for Former Foster Youth**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Assembly Bill 777 to provide additional support for youth pursuing higher education who have experienced an episode in foster care.

WAFCA is a statewide association that represents over fifty child and family serving agencies and leaders in the field and advocates for the more than 250,000 individuals and families that they serve each year. Our members' services include family, group and individual counseling; substance use treatment; crisis intervention; outpatient mental health therapy; and foster care programs, among others. For many years, our member agencies have focused significant attention on the needs of older youth in foster care, especially those who "age out" of the foster care system.

The foster care system recognizes that older youth in care experience unique challenges and therefore requires providers to work with these young people to develop the life skills they will need to live independently. Adolescents in care receive guidance on finding work, managing money, applying for post-secondary education, daily living skills, and healthy relationships, among others.

Background on Older Youth and Youth Aging Out of Care

Youth exiting Wisconsin's foster care system without permanency face a range of special challenges as they move into their adult lives. Like all young people, these youth need support – both financial and social – as they take their first steps toward independence. However, unlike their peers, youth aging out of the foster care system face unique obstacles that can make it more difficult as they seek to find their footing through their first tentative steps on the path to adulthood.

Over the past decade, researchers and lawmakers across the country have worked to develop stronger policies to support youth aging out of care. Former foster youth in Wisconsin participated in one of the most significant national studies, which has been frequently cited across the country as a basis for policies to increase services and supports for these young people. The *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth* tracked youth over nearly a decade. Some of the findings included that former foster youth:

- Are far less likely than their same age peers to graduate or earn a GED and significantly less likely to be enrolled in higher education;

- Are more likely to experience homelessness; and
- Are twice as likely as their same age peers to experience depression and physical health problems.

It is clear from the research and from the direct experience of our member providers that due to trauma and significant disruptions in their home and educational experiences, most youth in foster care at ages 18 and 19 are not developmentally ready for independence. In fact, more recent data on Wisconsin foster youth shows that while more than 80% of adolescents in care report a desire to pursue higher education, only twenty percent enroll and fewer than nine percent complete a bachelor's degree.

While the number of youth "aging out" of care continues to decline in Wisconsin, children aged 14-16, account for the second highest percentage of children in care. An episode of care in these critical years, even when a child ultimately reunifies with family or experiences another kind of exit to permanency, can impact their capacity to enter school and successfully complete a post-secondary degree.

Youth in care experience a range of challenges that inhibit the likelihood of pursuing and succeeding in higher education. They are less likely to have the guidance and attention they need to explore college options; they lack emotional and financial support; they are often behind in their secondary education due to instability in schools and failure to track credit attainment as they shift between schools. These deficits can extend into their college years as they experience less consistent adult support and more financial stressors. ("Foster Care Youth and Postsecondary Education: The Long Road Ahead," Amy Dworsky, Higher Education Today, December 11, 2017)

The Benefits of Assembly Bill 777

The targeted investment proposed in AB 777 would provide additional financial support for former foster youth pursuing higher education. The remission amount would be adjusted by the receipt of other scholarships, grants or aid received by a student. Recognizing the data about the impact of out-of-home care on adolescent youth, AB 777 extends the remission benefit to youth who have been in care for more than a year after the age of 13. Most importantly, the bill takes into account the lived experience of former foster youth by extending their window of qualification to 12 semesters, which would accommodate part-time schooling and allows for participation up to age 25. Former foster youth are more likely than their same age peers to initiate and complete higher education at a more advanced age.

Beyond the benefits of tuition remission, AB 777 provides some seed money to address the gap in adult support and guidance that former foster youth may experience on campus. Wisconsin has a few examples of campus-based efforts to support former foster youth and AB 777 would enable additional schools to build on these efforts and help young students connect with resources to address some of the unique housing and financial challenges that they may face.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We look forward to working with the Committee to advance this legislation.